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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 KUWAIT 000504

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [KWMN](#) [PINR](#) [PHUM](#) [KU](#)  
SUBJECT: KUWAITI WOMEN SHATTER PARLIAMENTARY GLASS CEILING

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Classified By: Political Counselor Pete O'Donohue for reasons 1.4 b and d

Summary

[1](#)1. (C) Frustrated by three years of political gridlock largely attributable to rancorous Sunni Islamists and perhaps hoping to avoid another parliamentary dissolution, Kuwait voters on May 16 elected a new National Assembly they hope will have better chances than the last two of working cooperatively with the ruling Al Sabah. A surprising and welcome development was the election of four women -- all U.S. educated Ph.D. holders -- four years to the day after Kuwaiti women obtained their full political rights. Shi'a candidates gained four seats (for a total of nine), while Sunni Islamists suffered significant losses. Looking forward, the big question remains who will head the government that will be introduced to the new parliament when it convenes June 2. Despite scattered allegations of vote-buying, the elections were widely deemed free and fair. Kuwait's Amir is credited with helping to guide an electoral process that, notwithstanding some fits and starts, was remarkably orderly and peaceful, giving Kuwaitis a refreshing reminder that their country's 45 year old democratic apparatus, remains capable of running smoothly. End summary.

Women Make History

[1](#)2. (U) On the fourth anniversary of Kuwait's decision to grant full political rights to women (including the right to vote and run for public office), on May 16 Dr. Ma'asouma al-Mubarak, Dr. Aseel Al-Awadhi, Dr. Rola Dashti and Dr. Salwa Jassar -- all U.S. educated women of prominence -- became the first women in Kuwaiti history to win coveted "green chairs" in the National Assembly. (Note: Dr. Ma'asouma, the frontrunner in her constituency and one of the highest overall vote winners, was also appointed Kuwait's first female minister in 2005, serving until 2007. End note.)

[1](#)3. (SBU) Though 54 percent of the population of Kuwait's 381,790 eligible voters is made up of women, victory for female candidates was by no means a foregone conclusion. After obtaining the right to vote and run in elections in 2005, women who ran in 2006 and 2008 acknowledged publicly that their efforts were motivated more by a desire to gain the requisite experience of running a campaign than by an expectation of clinching a victory. The May 16 elections afforded Kuwait's female candidates -- generally better

educated and more cosmopolitan than most of their male counterparts -- the opportunity to apply skills earned in previous campaigns and outshine many of their male competitors. They did this by:

- Effectively using mass media, such as SMS, blogs, and YouTube;
- Participating in media interviews;
- Soliciting celebrity sponsorship of notable politicians, sports figures or other prominent Kuwaitis;
- Visiting and conducting town hall-like sessions in all-male diwaniyyas (even in tribal areas);
- Focusing on the "real" issues of national unity, rule of law, education and corruption;
- Engaging in public debates; and,
- Exploiting frequently the Amir's call to elect the "best candidate."
- Employing campaigning techniques taught by MEPI-funded National Democratic Institute (NDI) teams on democracy, political reform and women's empowerment in the region. (Note: NDI consulted with all four women through previous programs ongoing since parliamentary elections in 2006. End note.)

#### Shi'a Claim Eight Seats

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14. (C) The election can also be viewed as a step up for Kuwait's Shi'a minority. With the victories of Drs. Ma'asouma and Rola, Shi'as took eight seats in the parliament, up from the five seats they held in 2008. As demonstrated by this victory, Kuwaiti Shi'as, though hampered

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by some glass ceilings -- notably in the security services -- enjoy a broader array of freedoms here than in most other countries in the Gulf. Of significance in this election was the ousting of Shi'a MP Ahmad Lari of the National Islamic Alliance (a group denoted by the GOK as Kuwaiti Hezbollah), who was arrested in 2008 for eulogizing slain terrorist Imad Mughniyeh.

#### Decline of blocs in favor of tribal allegiances

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15. (U) A growing phenomenon since the March Amiri dissolution of parliament that launched the campaign season has been the candidates' tendency to favor tribal allegiances (ref A) rather than aligning themselves with formal political associations and blocs. In this election, stumping as a kinsman in tribal rallies vice campaigning under a political group's banner for support became a common strategy employed by candidates, and met with positive results: all twenty National Assembly seats allocated for the outlying fourth and fifth districts were filled by tribalists.

16. (U) One such case is that of Dr. Jam'an al-Hirbish of the Islamic Constitutional Movement (ICM-Kuwaiti Muslim Brotherhood). Dr. Jam'an ran as a tribalist, downplaying (successfully) his affiliation with the ICM political association. (Note: ICM, though strong in the past, secured only Dr. Jam'an's seat on May 16. The association's decline was noted last year as well, and its losses were further propelled by its support for the K-Dow and Fourth Refinery projects which ran counter to positions favored by other Islamist groupings. End note.). The Salafi Islamic Grouping (SIG) also lost seats, going from four to two.

#### Election Fatigue

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17. (U) Election fatigue also played a significant role in this election, with several prominent Kuwaitis, including former chair of the Foreign Relations Committee Mohammad Jassem al-Sager, opting not to seek re-election. Some, like al-Sager, cited "burn-out" on elections, high costs, and the

expectation that this parliament would be short-lived as factors in their decision not to run. The turnout in this election in which 50 parliamentarians were selected from a field of 210 candidates -- including 16 women -- has been reported as up to 60 percent. The results for those who were most zealous in their attempts to grill the PM during the last parliament are mixed: Ahmad al-Mulayfi was ousted, while Dhaifullah Bou Ramya -- who spent part of the campaign in detention for remarks against MinDef Shaykh Jaber (ref B) -- reclaimed his seat.

Comment: Long Road Ahead  
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¶8. (C) This election will be celebrated as a victory for women and the Shi'a and a setback for Islamists, but it is too early to speculate whether this National Assembly will perform more effectively than the last two. Though MPs who identified themselves politically as Islamists suffered losses, equally conservative "tribalists" retain adequate numbers in parliament to effectively block or delay progress on many important issues. Also to be expected are sparks from Islamists and conservatives when two of the new female MPs, who do not wear the hijab, enter parliament for the first time. When non-hijabbed female ministers entered the hall in the past, it sparked a walkout by the more conservative MPs.

¶9. (C) Comment continued: Of primary concern is the ability of the government to engage effectively with the Gulf region's only directly elected and thus most notoriously difficult legislative body. The GOK, characterized by endemic weakness, has failed in the past to weather parliamentary onslaughts against its ministers. Though the victory by the small band of progressive women and moderate Shi'a provides a refreshing balance to the Islamist-leaning tribes, the electoral results do not guarantee movement on long-delayed projects such as oil, healthcare, and education. The GOK now has before it an opportunity to take the helm, but it remains unclear who it will present to the parliament as head of government in early June. For some time, speculation has revolved around the chances of current MinDef Shaykh Jaber al-Mubarak al-Hamad Al Sabah. However, recent rumors have emerged that PM Shaykh Nasser al-Mohammed al-Ahmad Al Sabah, who resigned from his post in March, might return to the premiership. Such speculation was fueled by the stage-managed "hero's welcome" he received by the press and general public last week upon his return to Kuwait after

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surgery in the U.S.

¶10. (C) A Final Note: As the Ambassador visited each of the four women's "election tents" last night to congratulate them on their victories, she was received with loud applause (from both men and women) and joyful "ululating," and the repeated comment: "Thank you for being the United States and for supporting our democracy. End comment.

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